

A MAN'S LINE

By William Byron Mowery

Author of "The Seventh Man,"
"A Cain of the Uplands," etc.

DO THOSE animals bite?" The big weather-bronzed livyere to whom the question was addressed grinned. He had heard that question from every traveler that ever came ashore in the Labrador tickle. They all seemed to think that the big snarling huskies were man-eaters.

"They do," the livyere returned, "but they jest et two Nascauppee Injuns a few minutes ago, an' they ain't hungry anymore."

"My word!" the newcomer ejaculated, shying away from the huskies and getting close to the three livyere trappers. They were leaning against a fish stage, watching the little steamer in the cove throw out ice-grapnels.

The genuine fright of the individual who had just come across the ice from the ship, made the tall livyere snap his braided whip at his huskies to keep them back.

The newcomer was a small slender man of forty, with the pallor of a city dweller and the accent of a Cape Cod bean-eater. His fingers were white and slender and his hands blue-veined. The gusty wind off the solid ice in the bay and from the berg field out to sea made him shiver in spite of several layers of Fifth Avenue clothes. He carried in his hand a fair-sized black satchel on which was engraved in gold letters: "Cyrus Cabot Marling, M. D."

"Be youse t' doctor that wuz comin' ashore?" the livyere asked, eyeing the satchel.

"Yes, I am Doctor Marling," he replied. He extended his hand. "Is it your family I was to see?"

"No, it ain't. I'm Gaspard Ellis. It wuz Sam Seelig's that need youse. I'm to take youse on t' komatik."

"The what?"

"T' dog sled. It's a pretty fair randy around t' point an' across t' bay to Seelig's cove. 'Bout fifteen miles."

"I thought the messenger said it was quite near. Why didn't the ship put in at the cove?"

"They's some bad reefs hid under t' ice in t' bay. If t' ice is good, we'll make it in two hours." Gaspard replied, a little aloof. Evidently the tender, shivering doctor did not rate very highly with him.

"D'youse want to make it on racquets or ride t' komatik?" he asked, as they started up the swell toward his little split-log cabin in the shelter of a clump of black balsam.

"I'll—I'll ride the sled," Marling ventured. "I never walked on snow-shoes and wouldn't be able to travel fast."

That didn't raise Gaspard's opinion of the doctor. He seemed to think that if the lives of Sam Seelig and his wife depended upon what this fellow could do for them, they wouldn't see another day.

The doctor went inside the cabin and stood by the stove while Gaspard hurriedly buckled his team to the komatik, a slender, pliant, twelve-foot affair shod with walrus

ivory and lashed across the top so that it took uneven ground like a snake. The brisk wind was steadily getting stronger. Noting that, Gaspard fitted a pole to the sled and put up a good spread of canvas, keeping it furled for the present.

While one of the other trappers held the team, he went into the cabin, threw some lassy seal-bun into a nunny-bag, strapped on his racquets, and gave Marling a heavy silver-tip overcoat. The doctor muffled himself up on the front of the sled. Gaspard picked up his twenty-foot whip; shouted, "Up along, youse!" and the komatik shot down the swell and out upon the ice.

With the wind at their backs, it took them less than half an hour to reach the rocky point of the tickle. Ten miles of open bay stretched ahead of them. Gaspard stopped the team and jabbed the ice with the butt of his whip.

The wind had swept across the open ice till the snow was but a couple inches thick. Gaspard stood for a moment thinking. Around his feet the snow began to get lead-colored.

"Why are we hesitating?" the doctor asked, coming up out of his wraps.

"I wuz thinkin' it 'ud be a bit safer to go across by sail without t' pups," Gaspard replied. "T' ice is pretty thin an' they ain't much snow atop it."

"Why don't we go around, then?" Marling asked a trifle anxiously.

Gaspard grunted.

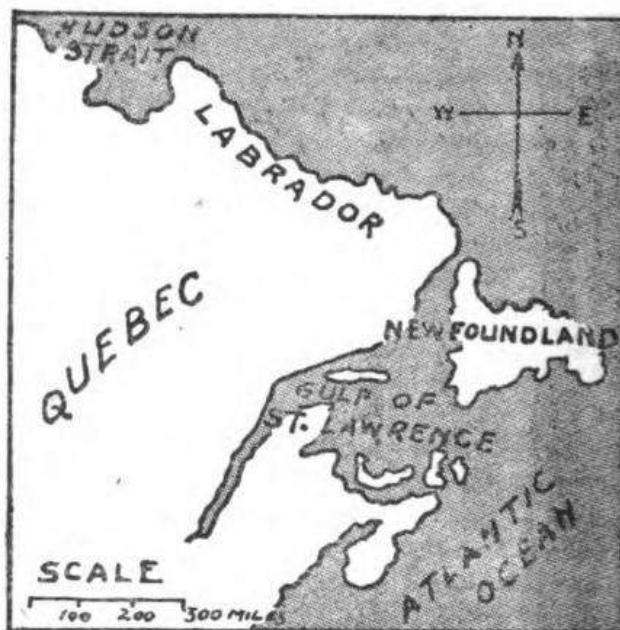
"It's thirty mile around t' head of t' bay, an' t' coast komatik trail is frightful rocky. Besides, Seelig an' his wife need attention quickest we can get there. Nobody been there with 'em since I left to get youse. We'll spank across t' bay."

He unbuckled the willing huskies and started them home. They trotted off in a line, tails over their backs. The lead-colored spot around the komatik and the place where Gaspard stood was getting wider. Gaspard hastily spread the canvas, gave the sled a shove, and jumped on. In two minutes the komatik was skimming along faster than the huskies could have taken it.



THE livyere was crouched at the rear end of the sled, busy with the sail and with steering. By dextrous shifting of his weight he guided the scudding komatik over the hummocky field. But with his simple rigging in the strong

wind and with no noselead on the sled, he had little control over the general direction. They flew along with the wind, heading straight as an arrow across the bay.



The broad white meadow beneath them, the checkerboard sky overhead, the flashing pink granite swells on shore and the stately march of the bergs outside the bay in the applegreen water, with the bright spring sun playing over it all, brought Marling out of his bundles, wide-eyed and marveling at the strange scene. At the edge of the bay ice, clouds of ivory gulls wheeled and screamed, darting down into the shoals of capulin. Robber gerfalcons poised over the gulls, swooping upon them when they rose with fish. High V's of gray wavies and old-squaws, strings of phalarope, shearwaters and Hudson's curlews, single pairs of trumpeter swans, whooping cranes and black-throated loons were noisily winging their way to the great island rookeries north of the Straits.

Gaspard paid little attention to Marling's rapturous "By Jove!" or "My word, how gorgeous!" It would have taken a sharper eye than the worthy doctor's to detect anxiety on the face of the livyere. Gaspard was leaning heavily to the left, warping the komatik as deeply into the bay as he could without slowing it down. While the doctor was rejoicing in the exhilarating fling, Gaspard's keener senses were noting the heave of the heavy groundswell and the springiness of thin ice beneath the komatik.

Two miles out in the bay, the hummocks

and uneven ice left off. The jagged field had been formed the Fall previous by the on-shore wind driving old slob and floes in close where they were frozen in the regular bay ice. On the level stretch, polished as smooth as a mirror, there was scarcely any snow. The komatik clipped along faster than ever. But even so, when Gaspard took a hasty glance behind them, he saw that the tracks of the sled runners were lead-colored, showing how thin and dangerous the bay ice had become. It sank perceptibly as the komatik passed; but being sea ice, it gave down without cracking or giving warning.

Gaspard tried to warp the sled still farther to the left as he felt the groundswell from the open sea getting more noticeable. But with most of the weight on one runner which bit through the thin crust of snow, the komatik slowed down dangerously. The leaden warning crept up alarmingly close to the komatik; and Gaspard had to let the sled take its course parallel to the ice line of the outer bay.

"Perfectly marvelous!" the doctor ejaculated, slewing sideways in his seat to get a straight view of a small berg standing close in.

The white caps had gnawed at its base till it was mushroom-shaped, the umbrella a glittering opaque white and the stalk a scintillating crystal blue. "By Jove, that's wonderful!"

"Set still," Gaspard snapped, the tug of the line jerking the words from him. "Lay down flatest youse can an' don't move."

"Why, what is the trouble, Ellis?"

"We're on thin ice. Ever' time youse move, t' komatik buckles. Get down."

Marling turned a white face to the livyere.

"Thin ice? You mean there is danger of us going through?"

Gaspard answered slowly, unconcernedly.

"Not much danger, skippin' along this fast. But they's no stoppin' or slowin' up till we get across."

The doctor sank back in his seat and sat still as a rock. In spite of the delicate situation, Gaspard had to grin at Marling's white face. Plainly he was trembling with fright.

In his thirty-eight years of "swiling down north," hunting and trapping in the bleak *Pais d'en Haut*, and fishing in any kind of boat and all kinds of weather along the rocky coast, Gaspard had a score of times

been in as tight a pinch as he was in now. The very silver-tip, whose hide was keeping the frightened doctor from getting frost-bitten, had been finished off by eight inches of a kiliutok below the fifth rib, after six bullets from a Mannlicher-Schoenauer had failed to stop the brute. Physical fear was not in his make-up. Though he had spoken lightly to Marling about the thin ice, Gaspard knew very well that if they were to get across, wind and ice and luck would have to be with them. Still he handled the line as deftly and guided the komatik as coolly as if he were flensing a marten behind his cabin.

As they came within two miles of the center of the bay, Gaspard saw, two hundred yards ahead, what looked like a sinuous green-gray snake twining across their path and running out of sight in both directions, but widening toward the open water. His face paled a shade beneath its bronze.

"Young lead," he muttered to himself. "T' off-shore wind'll open 'em quick. Six miles to go, but we're sure goin'!"

The little rift in the ice was not over six inches wide. The lithe komatik took it with no more than a slight tremor, and clipped on at full tilt, as if it understood the danger and was putting its best runner forward to get the men off the ice before the leads opened wider.

Gaspard rose carefully to his knees and watched ahead. Before many minutes another lead, a wider one, appeared. It was a good foot across. Anxiously he watched it swim near. The komatik took it, but the front end, under the doctor's weight, ducked uncomfortably. If the lead had been a foot wider, the runners would have snagged and plunged the sled head-first through the ice.

Gaspard inched forward on the sled.

"Marling!" he spoke sharply.

The doctor looked around fearfully.

"Take it easy," Gaspard cautioned, "but move back 'bout three feet on t' komatik. Don't jiggle t' thing, but hurry up. Then lay still an' flat!"

Marling loosened his stiff finger-hold on the top lashings of the komatik and obeyed without question. His eyes caught sight of the lead they had just passed, and full understanding of Gaspard's reason burst upon him. He gasped, too frightened to speak.

The wisdom of the move was demonstrated decisively not three minutes later. Considerably past the center of the bay, Gaspard caught sight of another lead ahead. It was so wide that even he was frightened for a moment. It was inconceivable that the komatik could take it, if it kept straight for the lead. At imminent danger of slowing the sled up till it would break through the ice, he swerved it sharply to the left, in order to cross the lead as far to the left as possible. Two hundred yards away, he swung it straight again and let the sled gather speed.

The lead was fully two and a half feet wide where the komatik hit it. The nose, not burdened by Marling's weight, shot across without snagging on the lip of the ice. In the tenth of a second when the weighted body of the sled passed over the lead, Gaspard felt a sickening sag and heard the ominous lap of the icy water. But both ends of the komatik were on firm ice, and its speed was great enough to shoot it on across and out of danger.

"That wuz a close 'un, doctor," Gaspard yelled, grimacing.


Marling did not move or answer. Gaspard worked the sled to the left as much as he dared and watched for other leads. They were getting close enough to see the fish stage in Seelig's cove and the red roof of his cabin set down in a thicket of Bankian Pine.

"I think we're clear of t' leads, doctor," Gaspard added, as the hummocks of the other shore came near.

Still no answer from Marling. Gaspard moved nearer and looked at him.

"Holy Moses!" he snorted. "Scared plumb out'n his senses. He's a great 'un, he is!"

II

 THE doctor was still shaking when the komatik, with a final kick, left the ice and came to a precipitous stop in a snow-drift. He extricated his satchel from the bank and followed Gaspard up the slope to the cabin. A string of lean snarling huskies squatted near the door made him pause till Gaspard cleared the way with his whip. Marling pushed open the door and went in.

The Seelig cabin was a tiny, two-room affair, sparsely furnished but snug and comfortable enough. A big sheet iron stove full of crackling spruce kept the room warm.

All cracks in the windows and walls were stuffed shut; the cabin had a close heavy air that made the doctor frown.

On a bunk against the wall lay a young livyere of twenty-eight. His right hand and forearm, crudely bandaged, hung over the side of the bunk. He breathed heavily and painfully, with a rattling deep in his chest.

A slender comely woman of twenty-five was lying on a cot near the stove. Her face, framed in a mass of black wavy hair, was colorless and pain-drawn. She did not move when the two men entered, but the young livyere turned his head toward them.

"That's Sam Seelig," Gaspard said bluntly. "He froze his lungs totin' a cribou in home durin' a cold snap a week back, an' his hand got nipped bad. Sam, this is t' doctor I got off t' steamer."

Seelig's eyes lit up hopefully.

"Glad to—have you here—doctor," he rasped. "We're in a—pretty bad fix with—both of—us down to once. Ellis here has—been takin' care of us. If it hadn't been for him—findin' us an' stickin'—by us—"

"Don't talk," Marling interrupted crisply. "Keep silent."

He deliberately took off his light gloves and warmed his hands by the stove, the while he looked around the cabin.

"Pull that cloth out of that wicket and let a little air in here," he told Gaspard.

The livyere obeyed reluctantly. Marling approached the cot and felt the woman's pulse. When he laid his hand on her forehead, she looked up at him out of eyes full of intense pain.

"It's all right, Mrs. Seelig," he said gently, smiling. "Now, let's see what this trouble is all about."

He drew down the cover and bent over her form. Deftly and quickly he made his diagnosis. There was surety in the touch of his finger and a confident mastery in his every action.

Gaspard had moved away a few steps and was awkwardly pretending to be busy with something or other.

"Bring me the satchel and some water," Marling said over his shoulder.

He mixed from a vial and with his hand under her head, gave the young wife the medicine. Then he covered her lightly and went to the bunk.

When he unbandaged Seelig's hand, his brows wrinkled. Gaspard looked in another

direction. Marling listened to the pulmonary infection.

He took Gaspard aside and spoke to him casually, as if he were not talking about the patients.

"His hand is in a very bad shape. I shall have to amputate two of his fingers, but I think I can save the hand. His left lung and the top of his right are infected, but with proper care he can get over that."

"And her?" Gaspard asked, following the doctor's purposefully simple words.

"She is in a critical state. One more day and there would have been no hope whatever. It's a major operation, as quickly as possible."

"A—a what?"

"A very serious operation. You will have to aid me as much as you can. Clean several receptacles thoroughly and have boiling water ready at hand."

Gaspard paled, but set about Marling's orders while Marling worked over Seelig and eased his breathing.

The doctor prepared his slim array of instruments and motioned to Gaspard to come and be ready. The big livyere approached reluctantly. He followed Marling's deft motions, fascinated and trembling.

A slight anesthesia was all that was necessary, for Seelig's arm up to his elbow was numb and senseless. The operation took less than two minutes. When Marling had finished the cauterizing, he looked up.

Gaspard was shaking till he dropped the instrument Marling had handed him.

"Come, come," Marling said curtly. "Keep your nerve, man. We've more serious work yet to do. I need you, God knows. Snap out of it."

Gaspard pulled himself together with an effort. Marling watched Seelig come to again, told him some ancient physician's joke that made him smile in spite of his pain; and then moved over to the cot.

Under his breath, Marling swore a polite oath at his lack of suitable instruments for the operation facing him. At best Gaspard was a clumsy aid. In his shaking condition, he was but little better than nobody. Marling poured him a good swallow from a vial labeled "*Spiritus Frumentii*"


and made him don a pair of sterilized gloves.

The operation that Marling performed in the little cabin was one that he spoke proudly about to medical friends in later years. He had to work under the handicap of totally unsuitable instruments, clumsy help, and very light anesthesia; for the patient's vitality had been drained by her long illness and her coming to again was uncertain. For the same reason, and to avoid infection from the air of the stuffy cabin, he had to work at lightning speed. It was a scant eight minutes from the tremulum of the incision to the last stitch.

As Marling was anxiously watching the patient, lost to all other things, he heard a heavy sound behind him. Turning, he saw that Gaspard had slumped down into a chair, white and shaking. The livyere's nerve had snapped. With his aid no longer needed, he was helpless as a babe.

"By Jove!" Marling muttered. "Keeled over! No more nerve than a jack-rabbit—around a thing like this!"

III

 THAT afternoon, when the young wife had regained consciousness and passed into a restful sleep and Seelig was breathing inaudibly, Marling went out where Gaspard was hitching up the unruly huskies.

"Tell Captain McLarry to give you this list of things, Ellis," he said, handing him a slip of paper. "And tell him I shall have to stay here to watch these folk. They can't be moved. Tell him to pick me up at your place on his return trip to Halifax. And, also, tell Mrs. Marling to go right on and enjoy the vacation for both of us. I shall get along nicely here. I want those things as quickly as you can return with them."

Before giving the word to the huskies, Gaspard looked Marling straight between the eyes and held out his hand.

"Doctor," he stammered, "if youse ain't plumb disgusted with me for bein' a ninny there in t' cabin, I'd like to shake hands with youse."

"Tut, tut!" Marling retorted. "I've been as badly scared myself. That was just out of your line."